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Would-be Rambos swim into mainstream

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By James Coates
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LAS VEGAS—While Soldier of Fortune magazine publisher Bob Brown stood beside the Sahara Hotel's pool being interviewed by a Finnish television reporter, explosives expert John Donovan was in the water teaching a group of would-be mercenaries the finer points of planting bombs in Central American rivers.

Nearby, as barelegged "keno girls" scurried about collecting bets for the bingo-like gambling game, another group of "mercs"—as the mercenaries like to call themselves—practiced knife-fighting techniques beneath the hotel palm trees.

"Even for Vegas this is weird," said Richard Yuthas of Scottsdale, Ariz., a hotel guest, as he watched Donovan's students bobble about the swimming pool in full scuba regalia and men in camouflage clothing fighting with knives and Oriental fighting sticks.

It was the Sixth Annual Soldier of Fortune Convention and Combat Weapons Expo, a yearly party Brown throws for readers and friends who lead lives of mystery and intrigue in the world's backwaters and back alleys.

But in some ways, the gathering last week of aficionados of America's leading journal of paramilitary affairs was less weird and more part of the American mainstream than past events.

After a decade of existence on the fringes of the radical right survivalist movement, Brown suddenly has found himself in the role of a newsmaker.

Ten years ago, Brown, a former Army Special Forces officer in Vietnam, started the magazine in a miner's shack on the outskirts of Boulder, Colo.

The lead article on Volume 1 Issue 1 was devoted to "underwater knife-fighting techniques" and the ads focused on "how to kill" books and cheap outdoors gear, Brown recalled.

Today, the magazine has multimillion-dollar revenues and ads from such major gun makers as Beretta, Colt and Ruger. And, Brown notes with glee, "people are taking us seriously for the first time."

Brown acknowledged in an interview that "a really big key" to his entry into the mainstream has been President Reagan's moves to get around Congress' desire to limit U.S. involvement in Central America by calling for voluntary help from the private sector.

Operating out of a headquarters in Boulder that now includes a warehouse for storing combat supplies, Brown's group has sent volunteer civilian delegations of demolition experts, automatic weapons instructors and others to El Salvador to train soldiers for the U.S.-backed army.

Demolition expert Donovan said he recently trained Salvadoran commandos to spot enemy booby traps and to plant their own.

"I know they killed some folks using the expertise I gave them," said Donovan, president of Donovan Demolition Inc. of Danvers,

Ill., which specializes in blowing up bridges and buildings for railroads and construction companies.

"I like to think we're doing something useful, that we're fighting back against communism," said the bomb expert, a hulking man with a shaved bald head and a single small gold earring.

Donovan, who also went with Brown to Afghanistan to provide similar training for rebel forces fighting Soviet troops, said he was one of 12 "SOF" [Soldier of Fortune] freelance military trainers.

In addition to dispatching advisers, Brown's group sends food, clothing and medical supplies to the Salvadoran military and the rebels in Nicaragua fighting to overthrow the leftist Sandinista government.

However, Alexander McColl, a director of the resupply unit who wears a pin reading, "I'd rather be killing Communists," denied that SOF is supplying guns and explosives.

"The laws and bureaucratic red tape involved in the movement of weapons in large enough quantities to be useful just make it not worth the hassle to send weaponry," McColl said.

Brown said the supplies are donated by magazine readers. SOF's other activities are financed by magazine revenues, he added, and by contributions from wealthy individuals, some of whom even he doesn't know.

None of the money, he said, comes from the U.S. intelligence

community.

"I have friends I trust who know who is giving the money, and I know that it is not government," said the adventurer turned publisher.

Reporters from Germany, France, Finland, Holland and Britain continually questioned Brown at the convention on whether he is an operative of the CIA in Central America.

"I tell them no; but they don't want to believe it," he said.

But because of what he is doing in Central America, Brown has become a celebrity, sought out not only by the world's press corps but also by Hollywood and even the U.S. government.

Moments before going on Finnish television, Brown received a visit from Academy Award-winning actor Robert Duvall, who said he wanted to know how to play the role of a mercenary in an upcoming film.

Brown said he had been a technical adviser for Sylvester Stallone on the hugely popular "First Blood" movies and that his magazine had run bare-chested macho poses of both Stallone's Rambo character and body builder Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Another indication of the rehabilitation of SOF was the appearance of representatives from the federal Drug Enforcement Administration who wanted to ask Brown and his followers for advice in attacking cocaine traffic in south Florida.

An estimated 800 people, most of them men and virtually all in military camouflage clothing, attended